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THE ORIGIN AND FIRST PERFORMANCE OF THE VANCOUVER FILM SOCIETY

by O. C. Wilson

The idea of organizing a film society first occurred to me as early as 1933, and I enlisted a number of friends in the project. Our ambition was to bring to Canada foreign language feature films and art films. To us the documentary film was then something almost entirely unknown. I think, too, it is fair to say that we engaged in this venture, not with any particular desire to study the motion picture as an art form, but rather to provide ourselves with a new and novel hobby and form of entertainment.

We soon discovered that to all practical intents and purposes 16 m.m. versions of the kind of thing we had in mind were unobtainable in North America, and our only practical source of supply would be 35 m.m. film which would have to be obtained from New York. In those days there were a number of small one-man organizations in New York who imported feature films on a limited scale, chiefly from France and Germany, and sometimes from other European countries.

The Department of National Revenue had established what was to us a prohibitive tariff on the importation of 35 m.m. positive prints. The situation was that we could rent a good feature in New York for about $50, but the duty on such a film would range from about $200 up. Our first problem then was to secure a customs permit to import these films for cultural purposes on a temporary permit duty free under Tariff Item 696. The Department of National Revenue however, took the position that we could not be classified in their thinking as an educational institution, and that this privilege was limited solely to Boards of Education and Universities etc. Altogether we spent some two years corresponding with various government departments on this matter and at last, according to my recollection, we heard that Mr. Donald Buchanan and a group of people in Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal had organized the National Film Society, now the Canadian Film Institute, under a government charter, and had secured the necessary permission.

I immediately wrote Buchanan and we affiliated ourselves with the National Film Society. Our next problems of course were to stage a membership drive, secure a motion picture theatre, secure an exemption from paying censorship fees, and finally to work towards a permit for Sunday exhibitions. The Sunday permit was impossible to obtain at that time and the only theatre we could rent on weekdays was a small house in the suburbs. Partly by pluck and luck, and chiefly thanks to one of our original members who was a prominent lawyer, we were ordered to submit all films for censorship but the fees were waived. Our concept of membership was that it would be limited to possibly a hundred members or more, and over this period of time we had acquired a membership of about eighty. At this point we discovered that thanks to the grandiose ideas of our secretary we had eighty members at $6 a piece, but practically the whole of our money had been spent. We had two alternatives, one to quietly bow out, and the other - put on a really intensive membership drive. We decided on the latter course. We won the support of the local papers, discovered other means of publicity, and our drive began to be completed within 30 days. I think in the first 20 days we obtained possibly another 20 members, and then to our relief the idea clicked, and by opening night we had over 600 members and a kitty of about $3,000.

The first programme we picked I recollect was a German feature film called "Kameradschaft" and three shorts, a German film on skiing in the Tyrol whose title I forget, a one reel title, "Cathedrals of France", and an American three reel art film titled "Lot in Sodom"; these we booked through a New York agent. Our opening night was 8.15 p.m on a Wednesday, and the films were scheduled to arrive on the morning of the preceding Monday. All other preparations, such as the printing of programmes etc., were pushe forward as rapidly as could be. Monday morning arrived and no film! We tried to contact New York without success When we did at last reach them, nobody seemed to know anything about our films, and at last early Tuesday morning we were informed that the shipper had simply forgotten all about them. We were promised that they would be shipped to us by air express immediately, and would arrive in

Vancouver not later than 8 o'clock in the morning of Wednesday. By late Tuesday night a heavy fog blanketed the whole Pacific Coast and all air transport was grounded. By Wednesday morning it had started to lift and we were promised the arrival of the 'plane at the airport by about 4.30 p.m. that afternoon. Naturally some fairly spontaneous re-planning was required, and since I spent my working days some 25 miles out of town, this had to be done by telephone.

The Censor was called and the situation was explained to him. He replied that his office closed at 5 o'clock, and it would be absolutely against the law to show the films unless they were censored, and he would so have to instruct the theatre owner. However, after some persuasion he volunteered that if he were to attend the performance himself, he could legally permit the films to be exhibited.

The Customs Department was contacted: they explained they had no facilities for clearing films at the airport, and this could only be done by special written permit issued by the Collector of Customs. The Collector of Customs could not be reached by telephone. I next telephoned my wife and explained the customs situation, and told her to get a permit out of the Collector of Customs, even if she had to kill him in the process! Finally, I arranged with one of our executives - Mr. O. C. Burritt - to drive out to the airport to await the arrival of the film.

The following events are related without exaggeration. My wife knew the Collector's reputation (he was the man who for two years had prevented us from getting a free entry permit). Without any prompting from me she sent next door, borrowed our neighbours' three year old child, who was the same age as mine but happened to be Chinese, put them both in our baby carriage, took the family dog and a large bag of buns, and went down to the Customs House and asked to see the Collector on urgent business. The Collector sent back word that he was much too busy to see her.

She took both children out of the baby carriage, gave them a bun a piece, unleashed the dog and announced that she would wait there until the Collector could see her. Some 40 minutes later - without seeing her - the Collector sent out the permit.

She collected the children, the dog, the baby carriage, and what was left of the buns, put them all in a taxi and sent them back to our next door neighbour, hired another taxi and drove to the airport where she met Mr. Burritt.

Our theatre was on the east side of the town, the airport a good 20 miles to the west, and there was no means by which I could reach Mr. Burritt or my wife to find out what the situation was. The 'plane arrived at the airport at a quarter to six; I arrived at the theatre at six o'clock; the theatre manager arrived at 6.30 p.m. and was followed by some of the executive. Due to a recurrence of fog my wife and Mr. Burritt arrived at the theatre at 7.30 p.m. with 17 reels of film in one large case. We manhandled this up to the projection room and started tearing the case apart practically with our bare hands in lieu of any hammers. When we had torn the side down from the case everybody turned pale and stood back in consternation. In order to save weight the shipper had stripped all the films from their reels, and there stood 17 reels of 35 m.m. nitrate stock - not even mounted on cores - and ready to unwind themselves at the sound of a cough. The occasion was climaxed when the projectionist informed us that he only possessed five 35 m.m. reels. Fortunately there were two operators and they volunteered, that if we were willing, they would endeavour to mount the film and keep the show running, but we might possibly have interruptions in the performance. Very fortunately no fire marshal was on the deck to put a stop to the proceedings.

I had announced that the show would start at 8.15 p.m. and that late comers would not be allowed to come in and disturb those already seated. However, in those days the Vancouver public was in the habit of treating such admonitions rather casually, and by 8.15 not more than a third of the audience had turned up. Faithful to my promise I ordered the doors locked and the show to begin. We ran the first two shorts, at the end of which I stopped the show, turned up the house lights, went to the door, to find some 400 indignant customers beating on them. They stormed in, seated themselves and were then given a brief explanation by the President that 8.15 meant 8.15 and for this occasion only we would repeat the first two shorts of the show for the benefit of late comers - but never again. During this period Mr. Burritt discovered an unauthorized visitor wandering about the theatre, and some three times in ten minutes forcibly ejected him - he turned out to be the Provincial Fire Marshal.

None of us had ever seen the films being exhibited; all we knew about "Lot in Sodom" was that it had an interesting title and was an art film. In actual content it was an almost literal filming of the biblical story, including the passage to the effect that Lot put out his daughter for the young men and she knew them. I was not even looking at the films. I had too much else to do. Suddenly Mr. Burritt came panting up to me, his face as white as a sheet and said, "For God's sake take a look at what is on the screen.". I peered through the back of the curtain and to my surprise and consternation saw the picture of Lot's daughter completely nude making advances to a group of young pansies. Mr. Burritt and I looked at each other and wondered why the Censor did not bring the show to a halt immediately. However, good man that he was, the Censor never even referred to the subject.

For the rest of the evening everything went without a hitch, and from enthusiastic comments made by various people then and in the press next day, we knew we were a success.

I stayed behind to clean up for the matter of shipping and and handling arrangements and so on, and at last arrived home some time after midnight. The crowning event of my day was the discovery that my wife had invited in friends who drove her home and without thinking about it had given them the whole of my only half bottle of whiskey.

LET'S SAVE THE FILM RECORD

by Dorothy Macpherson

"Cornflakes," that's what Kemp Niver, chief restorer for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, calls the fragments which often are all he finds inside the old film cans he opens for inspection. Called in by the Los Angeles County Museum to assess the William S. Hart collection of films, bequeathed to the Museum by the late actor, he found them reduced almost to ashes by the chemical action between the nitrate film and the storage cans.

Other motion picture pioneers whose films are rapidly disintegrating are D.W. Griffith, Harold Lloyd, Lon Chaney and Mack Sennett, says Jim Powers in a story in Variety, February 4th. The Academy has no great funds at its disposal, but, with a little money squeezed out of its general budget each year, it has done yeoman work. It is responsible, for instance, for preserving and restoring a whole collection of the early work of film pioneer George Melies, which would otherwise have been lost.

Virtually nothing is being done on a studio level to preserve or restore these irreplaceable films, many of them unique examples of what some consider the only truly American art form. Aside from artistic considerations, some are also of the greatest historical value. "The tragedy is," says Niver, "that there could be a constructive program of preserving this priceless old film for a fraction of the cost that studios and others are paying in nitrate film-vault rentals to preserve nothing but canfulls of cornflakes."

He estimates that in many cases vault rentals run to $50,000 a year for storing these cans, while in the cans themselves nothing remains to be stored. For a part of this vault rental -- "on nothing" he exclaims -- a restoration process could be started. Another practical aspect of restoration is that modern safety film, unlike the old nitrate, requires no special storage facilities, and, hence, is cheaper to keep.

Until his sudden death, Cecil B. Demille was one of the few -- perhaps the only one -- of the film pioneers who had taken personal action to insure that his films were being preserved. He had transferred at least one print of all his pictures to modern safety film.

As far as is known, however, he is the only one. Niver cites, as an example of the situation, that when producer Jerry Wald wanted to use some old film clips of Theda Bara and other silent screen stars for the last Academy Awards telecast, none were projectible.

The Library of Congress is interested in doing something and the Museum of Modern Art has an important film Library, but neither organization has funds for a continuous program of restoration. In most cases, says Niver, museum collections only mean a transfer of storage space, from the safety vaults required for the incendiary film, to museum space, without anything done to probe what's in the cans. "It will be a tragic thing," he adds, "if this great art form of the 20th Century, Hollywood's historic past, is allowed to disappear with no traces except a few brown ashes of nitrate film."

Against this background of indifference it is pleasant to be able to set the recent decision of the Canadian Government (C.F.I. Bulletin, December 1958) to provide a special allotment of funds to the National Film Board for screening and selecting, cataloguing and storing what is to be kept of the sixty million feet of motion picture film now stored by the Board. What proportion will be transferred to modern acetate base stock is for later decision. Another encouragement has been the grant from Imperial Oil Limited of $5,000 to be spent over a three-year period on the preservation of films which would otherwise be lost.

Still outstanding is a decision by the Canadian Government on the establishment of a Canadian Film Archive, but acceptance of the Canadian Film Archives Committee as a member of the International Federation of Film Archives is a long step towards Canadian cooperation with those who, in other countries and often in even more difficult circumstances, are working to preserve the records and achievements of their past for this and future generations.

NEW FILM ON GUIDING

YOU'RE IT 15 mins. sd. b&w $2.00

Produced for Public Relations Department of the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A.

This film is not just for public relations committees. It is for every adult in Girl Guiding – it is not a public relations movie in the sense that it will help interpret Girl Guiding to the public, but rather it is directed to the Girl Guide adult family to help us all carry on successfully those aspects of public relations that really are everybody's business. It demonstrates the kinds of public relations which an organization, dependent on community support, must possess.

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THE GARDEN OF GUJERAT...A STORY OF CO-OPERATION

This is a recently released UNICEF film produced by the Government of India.

The Garden of Gujerat is located just north of Bombay and centers its interests within the town of Anand. The film tells of how the villagers of this teaming locale - where life is paced by age-old traditions - solved a pressing economic problem through co-operation.

The family buffalo produced milk abundantly at certain periods of the year, and very insufficiently during the low milk producing season. During the flush milk season families would sell all the milk available - purchasing household essentials with the meagre money derived, and leaving no milk for the children.

The plan devised was to build a milk drying plant in order to preserve and distribute milk the year 'round. The Kaira Co-operative Union was formed and it eventually sought help from the Indian Government. To-day the completed dairy stands as a modern landmark in a very proud village.

The Anand milk plant is a testimony of one of the most ambitious co-operative ventures of our time. The Government of India sought dairy plant equipment from UNICEF and, in turn, assured UNICEF that mothers and children would receive powdered milk free of charge - UNICEF had been supplying India with powdered milk fr

been supplying India with powdered milk since 1951. Thus the Kaira Co-operative Union, which to-day comprises over 20,000 farmers in more than 70 villages, bears international significance as well.

THE ENCHANTED ISLES 17 mins. sd. col. $3.00
Produced for United Kingdom Information Service 1958. Film follows the "Royal Route" to the Hebrides, with visits to Iona, with its Cathedral and nunnery, to Fingal's Cave, the great cockle beach at Barra and the islands visited by Bonnie Prince Charlie. (also available for preview with view to purchase)

NATURE OF WORK SERIES

A Study of Man in his Job, this series of six films was produced by the National Film Board. Each film is 30 minutes black and white, with a service charge of $3.00

The series presents six different people in six different jobs and shows how they react to demands made on them. Each film in the series has an analysis presented by H.D. Woods, Professor of Industrial Relations and Director of the Industrial Relations Center of McGill University.

The films are...

THE CLERK
MAN ON THE ASSEMBLY LINE
THE SKILLED WORKER
THE GENERAL FOREMAN
THE DEPARTMENT MANAGER
THE VICE-PRESIDENT

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During the past month three film libraries have kept films so long that other bookings have had to be cancelled. Film libraries should know what happens when films are not returned on time. PLEASE OBSERVE THE DUE-BACK DATE and avoid collect telegrams to yourself and inconvenience, disappointment and frustration to others.

NEWS ABOUT FILM FESTIVALS

VANCOUVER FILM FESTIVAL will be held from July 11 to August 15, 1959. Ticket order forms should be sent to the Festival Box Office, T. Eaton Co. of Canada Ltd., 515 West Hastings Street, Vancouver 2, B.C.

5TH ANNUAL ROBERT FLAHERTY FILM SEMINAR will be held August 16 - 22, 1959. Application forms are available from Department of General Instruction, Arts and Humanities, University Extension, University of California, Los Angeles 24, California.

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Mimeographed lists of films on the following subjects are ready for release. Get your copies now

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ALCOHOLISM
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